

Ian Mwesiga: Beyond the Edge of the World

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Whither and Whence Modernity?

By Dr. Darla Migan

In *Beyond the Edge of the World*, Ian Mwesiga depicts figures in restorative poses surrounded by scenes of architectural delight. Across the series, well-toned figures relax alone or with a friend, casually statuesque and painted in the artist's signature slate/onyx. We are invited to imagine balmy temperatures in an atmosphere surrounding graceful limbs. Under cloudless blue skies, light fog, or moonlit nights, Mwesiga's characters in *Beyond the Edge of the World* also seem to be unaware of being watched.

Indeed, it is the viewer who is caught watching—as if spying enviously—like a curious voyeur given a glimpse into the rarified air of nonchalant moments. An adolescent reclines under dusky moonlight across a freshly fallen branch. She is supported by a low brick wall separating a manicured park from a clean concrete sidewalk. But up close, when we see the girl's arm dangling just above her twice-bitten apple, she seems to have sprouted another limb—just for the task of reaching back to her fruit (*Tales of the Moonlight Girl*, 2023). Who is she? How on earth!

Mwesiga's subtle allegorical moves shy away from the fantastic which is perhaps already too deeply embedded in the tales of earlier travelers. While we celebrate the centenary of the literary giant Franz Kafka's death this year, the title of Mwesiga's new series references a phrase from the internationally acclaimed novel *Kafka on the Shore*. Just as Haruki Murakami's Japanese critics accused the author of being anti-Japanese to achieve his near-universal appreciation or how a global soda brand's logo may be as recognizable as a Doric column's affiliation with the ancient Greeks, Mwesiga creates a signature for himself as an artist who is also freed from the maligning codification of the home he loves. This slip between expectations of trauma porn and paint shows up as a wry deviant gaze. The painter dares to take a bite of the 'forbidden fruit' undermining myths of any 'developing' world on the horizon. Brushing away any flattened idea of post-modernity, instead, I feel Mwesiga retuning the volley and asking how we may imagine a future within our ongoing Kafkaesque modernity?

As I write this essay, I believe that I must have read a used copy of Haruki Murakami's 2002 novel fifteen years ago in the state of ease expressed by Mwesiga's characters. In the back of my mind, I see myself stretched out, reading *Kafka on the Shore* while lounging somewhere between sand and sea or on thin hostel-sheets cooled by electric fans. By then—sometime in my mid-twenties—the novel had been talked about for a few years. While traveling with my lover in South-east Asia, perhaps the English-language title beamed out to me from the communal shelf of our guesthouse. I cannot remember any narrative that may have unfolded from the prose, not exactly. But I do remember the position of my body and recall being hailed by Murakami's poetic voice. Still, I cannot really be sure, perhaps I simply like the feelings that artists express when they tell me that they love this book. Our memories of lovely days spring forth vividly because they reside somewhere between shadow and infinity, encouraging us to trust the formation of hope.

What I do know for sure is that after visiting this series of paintings I was compelled to purchase Murakami's memoir at the airport, completely unprompted. In *Novelist as a Vocation* (2015, trans. 2022) the author recalls the moment he realized his life's purpose. That flash of inspiration did not arise in an encounter with the writing traditions of his

native Japan, nor while hunched over the Anglophone novels he preferred to read in between running a jazz bar in Tokyo. No, instead the now world-famous writer recognized his vocation at another kind of decisive turn, in the sweet 'crack' of a batter's hit at a baseball game.

We are always already insiders or potential outsiders from someone's vantage. Mwesiga's 'clean' vistas, unhampered by smog or crowds, suspends viewers in daydream mode. The sensation of swirling leaves just landed lifts the weight of the canvases, creating a barometric instrument of the imagined air as shadows play with cut-out or incomplete walls nearby potted outdoor shrubbery. A curving poolside staircase (a painterly punning on Cubist-Futurist geometries) ascends to exit up and out of art history. Only now she is wearing a modest bathing suit.

But the clarity on the painted surface is accomplished not only due to the realistic possession of the *mise-en-scène* rendered through a skillful precision on par with a celebrity architect. In *Man Striding on a Staircase* (2023), we see a figure stretching a hamstring on the steps of a large building protected by sexy brickwork. Mwesiga's bricks share an affective kinship with the painter Martin Wong (1946-1999) whose own meticulous painting of the building material offers immediate psychic grounding. An interior view of what I imagine to be a stately residence extends through a clear and recently cleaned plate-glass wall-sized window looking out onto the semi-manicured wildlife beyond the home. In relation to the strange realism of his figures' silvery tonal appearance, the painter's evocation of interior as environment situates an impish plein-air mischief (wherein *landscaping* as opposed to the fantasy of any God-given landscape) works to expose the often-overlooked sur-reality codifying the presence of wealth.

Figures glisten like sparkling charcoal-dust despite the fact that only oil paint is present. The artist insists on the viewer's experience of this diffraction between expectation and appearance (reminiscent of Amy Sherald's shading technique). That is, Mwesiga is a painter who makes a unique claim on viewers by way of provoking temporalities occurring only at the site of painting and in the viewer's own memories of what it feels like to be in the undeniable presence of another, without preconception. The contemplation sparked by this painter's imagination moves me back toward my own youthful call to poetics. Herein I feel something akin to a lover's contemplation which may still move us to open up futures for our social materiality unlike the jaded particularism of reportage.

Bridging east and west, Kampala is located midway between Tokyo and New York City, closer to both the origin of our species and to the source of the minerals that connect our devices. Mwesiga's formal translation of grace transports by beckoning us toward the world not unlike the one imagined by the novelist—a world where all are welcomed into love's embrace. Continental Africa remains at the heart of worlds both imagined and materially linked through the uneven distribution of resources driving rhythms of life all over our earth. Since my recent encounter with this series, one of my writing students, a photographer educated in Japan and in the United States, taught me the Japanese proverb: 'a nail that sticks out gets hammered down'. Between Murakami and Mwesiga a lesson in grace emerges on what feels like exciting dysregulations, cruder sweeps of genre and historical eras that will and do continue unfolding.

Surrendering to tranquil blue palettes, we may feel confused by the initial sense of a stark departure from landlocked post-colonial turmoil or anywhere that modernity's false promise of freedom may feel as if it were beyond the edge of this world. *Swimmer and Man Standing by the Pool* (2023) may bring to mind the racialized difference between access to private property and public pleasures that enjoin poolside views by the painters David Hockney and Noah Davis (1983-2015). Mwesiga raises the specter of segregation in the background with a no-swimming sign discouraging the frolic by the Black femme taking an unplanned dip. We are encouraged to follow her lead and relax as she confidently makes her swan dive with a friend nearby to play lookout. Here, imagining serenity is not only a form of material transport but also a method and style of self-transformation. The question arises: How might it feel to be myself if my presence is not forever overdetermined by configurations of the past?

By the end of the twentieth century the idea of a liberal-democratic cosmopolitanism hardly felt like an apex of universal freedom. And yet we are all learning from one another: Painting traditions sourced by way of multi-channel cultural encounters are now taken up and dwarfed by the colossal rise of art from the global cities of Asia and Africa. If the justification of a lack of culture had to be invented in the nineteenth century to cross oceans and exploit the resources of many for the few, then the contemporary continental African artist may indeed invent the gaze toward our peace by subtly gesturing toward the feeling of gliding through a swimming pool. What if modernity can only be spied obliquely, in the free play of the mind's eye, like a hearty crack in the real, or an embrace felt in reverie?

About:

Ian Mwesiga (b. 1988) is a painter living and working in Kampala, Uganda. Mwesiga graduated with a BA in Industrial Fine Art & Design from Makerere University, Kampala, in 2014. Solo exhibitions include *Theater of Dreams*, Mariane Ibrahim, Chicago, IL (2022), and *Who am I?*, AKA Gallery, Kampala (2014). His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including *Un Abrazo*, Mariane Ibrahim, Mexico City, Mexico (2023), *La Vie en Rose*, Mariane Ibrahim, Chicago, IL (2022), *J'ai Deux Amours...*, Mariane Ibrahim, Paris, France (2021); African Culture and Design Festival (ACDF) Lagos, Nigeria (2017); *Young Guns*, Circle Art Agency, Nairobi, Kenya (2017); East African Modern and Contemporary Art Auction, Circle Arts Agency, Nairobi, Kenya (2016); among others. Mwesiga's work has been featured in Art Basel, Expo Chicago, The Armory Show, and Paris+ Art Basel. Mwesiga participated in Asiko Art School residency, Lagos, Nigeria, in 2015.

Darla Migan, Ph.D. is a philosopher of aesthetics. Dr. Migan has published articles on solo exhibitions by Faith Ringgold, Abigail DeVille, Tau Lewis, Julie Mehretu, Wangechi Mutu, Akeem Smith, and Stacy Lynn Waddell. In the last year, she has been commissioned to write essays on Ligia Lewis, Charisse Weston, and Elzie Williams III. Since completing her dissertation on Harlemites Dr. Adrian Margaret Smith Piper, Dr. Migan's research expanded to include the shifting conditions of global art markets. She is an alumnus of the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, a recipient of the Dorothea and Leo Rabkin Prize for her work as an arts journalist, a recipient of an Andy Warhol Arts Writers Grant, and a recent ArtTable Fellow at the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY. Dr. Migan teaches the online course "Philosophy for Artists" and is a Lecturer at The New School for Social Research.